# "Ghetto Heaven": *Set It Off* and the Valorization of Black Lesbian Butch-Femme Sociality

**by Kara Keeling**

## "Every Thug Needs A Lady"[1]:
### Black Butch Masculinity and Ghettocentric Common Sense

F GARY GRAY'S 1996 film, *Set It Off,* recog-
. nizes the Blaxploitation films of the
early 1970s and the concern with ghetto life
that pervades them as its filmic predecessors.
Blaxploitation films provide a set of shared
memory-images on which today's ghettocen-
trism often draws in order to cinematically
represent the new reality of the post-industri-
al city's ghetto. *Set It Off* announces its kin-
ship with Blaxploitation during its title
sequence.[2] After a violent opening scene in
which the audience is introduced to Frankie,
Vivica A. Fox's character, the words "Set It
Off" are legible onscreen while Parliament's
funkadelic song "Flashlight" plays loudly at
the 1970s costume party that Stony, played by
Jada Pinkett, is throwing for her brother's
graduation from high school. Introducing its
audience to three of the film's four main
protagonists while each of them is dressed in
the fashions of the 1970s, *Set It Off*
announces visually that its filmic forefathers
are the Blaxploitation films of the early
1970s. Recognizable from the Blaxploitation
cycles, yet significantly different, the "ghetto-
centrism" of mass cultural commodities mar-
keted to "blacks" and "youth" in the U.S.
since the early 1990s marks the (re)emer-
gence of a diffuse national preoccupation
with urban life.

Ed Guerrero uses the term "ghettocentric"
in order to describe the preoccupations of a
segment of the films that comprised "the new
black movie boom" of the 1990s; according to
Guerrero, films such as *Boyz N The Hood*
(1991), *Menace II Society* (1993), and *Juice*
(1992) can be understood as "ghettocentric."[3]
Taking his cue from Guerrero, S. Craig
Watkins uses "ghettocentric" to refer that
same body of films, relying upon the term to
describe the films' settings and thematic con-
cerns.[4] Insofar as I invoke "ghettocentrism" in
this essay in reference to a film (*Set It Off*)
that is set in "the ghetto" and preoccupied
with the issues that setting currently raises, my
own use of the term is akin to Guerrero's and
Watkins'. But, I use "ghettocentric" in an even
more specific sense than they. I use the term
to refer to an innovation within what Wah-
neema Lubiano has characterized as "com-
mon sense black nationalism."

I AM USING THE PHRASE "common sense black
nationalism" here to refer to the set of
expressions that the socio-political philoso-
phy of black nationalism takes as it organizes
groups of people. An Italian Marxist, Anto-
nio Gramsci talks about "common sense" in
the context of his thinking about
hegemony.[5] Gramsci insists that "all men are
intellectuals," even though not all "have in
society the function of intellectuals."[6] He
points out that non-intellectuals do not exist
because, in his words,

> Each man...outside of his professional activity,
> carries on some form of intellectual activity, that
> is, he...participates in a particular conception of
> the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct,
> and therefore contributes to sustain a conception
> of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into
> being new modes of thought.[7]

"Common sense" is the name Gramsci gives to "man's conception of the world." According to Gramsci's formulation of it, common sense contains elements that consent to dominant hegemonies as well as aspects that are antagonistic to those hegemonies. The common senses that congeal a group can be understood as records of that group's survival, incorporating compromises to dominating and exploitative forces while retaining challenges to those same forces.

THERE IS NOT JUST ONE COMMON SENSE, but various common senses, as many as there are groups of living beings with brains. While much of Gramsci's attention and, consequently, much of the attention of his readers (including myself), focuses on the common sense of "subaltern" or marginalized and oppressed groups, dominant groups operate according to common sense as well. Their conception of the world provides the official common sense of a society, a common sense that garners the spontaneous consent of many subaltern groups. (Of course, one also must factor "coercion" and "violence," not simply "consent," into the struggle for hegemony.) Like subaltern common sense, "official common sense" contains elements "borrowed" (or, more likely, stolen or appropriated) from other groups, particularly those exploited by the dominant group. These appropriated elements provide a record of concessions made by the dominant group in the struggle for hegemony.

Throughout his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci insists upon the need to challenge received ways of thinking and seeing, including assumptions about which forms of knowledge are most valuable. Following Gramsci, I insist that "culture" and "political economy" must be thought together, particularly during this time of on-going de-colonization in the midst of a global restructuring of capitalism. Taking my cue from Gramsci's thinking about common sense and building on Lubiano's discussion of "common sense black nationalism," I attend to ghettocentric common sense here in an effort to understand how the images available in *Set It Off* participate in the struggle for hegemony involved in capitalist exploitation.[8]

WRITING IN 1997, in the innovative essay "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others," Lubiano points out that "black nationalism is significant for the ubiquity of its presence in black American lives—in those lives' conventional wisdom."[9] Lubiano describes "nationalism" as a "social identification," defining it as:

the activation of a narrative of identity and interests.... that members of a social, political, cultural, ethnic, or 'racial' group relate to themselves, and which is predicated on some understanding – however mythological or mystified – of a shared past, an assessment of present circumstances, and a description of or prescription for a shared future.[10]

Lubiano further provides a context for the historical production of black nationalism as a political praxis for black Americans by reminding her readers that understanding nationalism in this way "draws on various nineteenth-century black intellectuals' descriptions of their group's political imperatives."[11] Counterposed to those forms of white American nationalism that solidify official narratives of U.S. history, black nationalism, for Lubiano, is:

a sign, an analytic, describing a range of historically manifested ideas about black American possibilities that include any or all of the following: racial solidarity, cultural specificity, religious, economic, and political separatism. (This last has been articulated both as a possibility within and outside of U.S. territorial boundaries.)[12]

It is, further, "a constantly reinvented and reinventing discourse that generally opposes the Eurocentrism of the U.S. state, but neither historically nor contemporaneously depends upon a consistent or complete opposition to Eurocentrism."

In its current manifestations, black nationalism is, in other words, the form of common sense that has become hegemonic among those who understand themselves to be "black." As such, it explains and secures that group's cohesion as "black," giving the notion of "belonging" to that group a political force that is antagonistic to those forms of racist domination and exploitation which assist in the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony in the U.S.[13]

YET, AS A FORM of what Gramsci refers to as "subaltern" common sense (as opposed to "official" common sense), the common sense expressions of black nationalism in circulation today provide various loci of consent to existing modes of domination and exploitation. For instance, as Lubiano points out, common sense black nationalism "reinscribes...in particular places within its own narratives of resistance" those aspects of official common sense that rationalize state domination and exploitation. Lubiano contends that such "reinscription most often occurs within black nationalist narratives of the black family," pointing out that "Black feminist cultural commentators across two centuries have developed critiques of this familial narrative."[14]

Lubiano's discussion of common sense black nationalism illuminates the ways in which it contains elements in embryonic form that, under certain circumstances, might be elaborated into what Gramsci calls a "critical and coherent conception of the world."[15] Lubiano's essay also emphasizes the way in which "common sense black nationalism" is a historically specific conception of the world that provides a sense of collectivity as "black people." In the context of the present analysis of *Set It Off,* my embrace of "ghettocentricity" is meant to signal a historically specific shift in the on-going and contested consolidation of common sense black nationalism.

ENJOINING GUERRERO AND WATKINS' understanding of ghettocentric films, I understand "ghettocentrism" to be a historically specific reaction to and articulation of a social reality (the post-industrial city's "ghetto") produced at the juncture between globalizing capitalism and contemporary U.S. racism. My usage of the term "ghettocentric" is informed by that of Robin D. G. Kelley. Kelley uses the term "ghettocentric" in order to locate the way that:

> the criminalization, surveillance, incarceration, and immiseration of black youth in the postindustrial city have been the central theme in gangsta rap, and at the same time, sadly, constitute the primary experiences from which their identities are constructed. Whereas Afrocentric rappers build an imagined community by invoking images of ancient African civilizations, gangs-

ta rappers are more prone to follow Eric B. and Rakim's dictum, "It ain't where you're from, its where you're at." ...The construction of the "ghetto" as a living nightmare and "gangstas" as products of that nightmare has given rise to what I call a new "Ghettocentric" identity in which the specific class, race, and gendered experiences in late capitalist urban centers coalesce to create a new identity —"Nigga."[16]

I embrace Kelley's use of "ghettocentric" because of its specificity; it describes a new, post-industrial, social reality. Kelley offers "ghettocentric" in contradistinction to the "Afrocentric" conceptions of the world that continue to function within the common sense black nationalism that was refined in the 1960s and 1970s. The shift to ghettocentrism for some of those who operate according to common sense black nationalism hinges upon a recognition of a new reality, that of the postindustrial city's ghettos, that sets contemporary black ghetto existence apart from prior manifestations of life in America's ghettos. Within "black common sense" (in the Gramscian sense), the most recent roots of a collective preoccupation and fascination with urban life are perceptible in the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party and its emphasis on the *lumpenproletariat* as a "revolutionary" force and, more generally, in Black Power's formulation of "the ghetto" as the seat of the black community.[17]

SIGNIFICANTLY, HOWEVER, as Kelley points out, the conditions particular to the "postindustrial city" constitute "a fundamentally different reality" of "the black working class" from the urban realities that existed prior to 1970. Recognizing the specificity of the situation that shapes "ghettocentrism," I use the adjective "ghettocentric" throughout this essay to refer to cultural products, specifically music (especially gangsta rap) and movies, that consolidate and enable the circulation of narratives about the postindustrial city's "ghettos," urban spaces that are populated predominately by African Americans and immigrants of color.

The significance of the widespread popularity of "gangsta rap" to the cycle of ghetto action films released during the early 1990s has been noted by others.[18] The gangsta rap

market is not, however, Set It Off's sole market, even given the film's generic affiliation with the ghetto action films released prior to it. Within a "black film" historical narrative based on generic cycles, Set It Off would be situated between two related but competing cycles in "black popular film," the ghetto action cycle I have been discussing and a cycle of films such as Waiting to Exhale (1995), Love Jones (1997), Eve's Bayou (1997), and Soul Food (1997) that targets those elements of common sense black nationalism which consolidate a "black middle class" market.

IN THEIR DETERMINATIONS of the generic horizon of expectations that one might bring to Set It Off, reviewers of the film most often compared it to Waiting To Exhale, the 1995 adaptation of Terry McMillan's best selling novel. Most reviewers received the film as a Blaxploitation style "Girlz N The Hood Exhaling" type of movie.[19] This points to another remarkable aspect of Set It Off—the way that it functions as a vehicle for innovations within, transformations of, and challenges to, some of ghettocentrism's organizing principles—most notably, the prevalence of sexism and homophobia in the practices forming in and informing gangsta rap. Hence the difficulty that reviewers had in situating Set It Off into their existing generic categories and their reluctance to understand it according to the available categories of ghettocentrism familiar from previous films.

The sexism and homophobia endemic to ghettocentrism has pervaded mass culture in various ways since the early 1990s. Ghettocentrism's sexism and homophobia undermine not only ghettocentrism's own ability to articulate a conception of the world that enables a social movement that is radically different from those that currently are perceptible, but also the potential for ghettocentrism's salient critique of post-industrial urban reality to be seen and heard by official common sense and its burgeoning categories of "political correctness." Instead of perceiving social reality through the lens offered by ghettocentric narratives in a way that would force official common sense to recognize its

own role in perpetuating the violent conditions holding that reality together, official common sense is calibrated to recognize mainly gangsta rap's derogatory and violent references to "bitches," "ho's," and "faggots." Official common sense uses the glaring sexism and homophobia of these references, their "political incorrectness," as locations into which it siphons off the pernicious homophobia and sexism that maintains its own intelligibility.[20] Simply put, by figuring gangsta rap's extreme sexism and homophobia as the aberration to be overcome, official common sense further naturalizes the sexism and homophobia upon which the hegemony it secures relies.

In contrast, Set It Off removes much of ghettocentrism's blatant sexism and homophobia from view by putting issues affecting "black women" at the center of the film's framing of ghettocentric reality and revealing something new in the cinematic image of ghettocentrism—"female bank robbers." Released a couple of years after the ghetto action film cycle seemed to have run its course and in the midst of a burst of films consolidating and targeting "black women," Set It Off introduces a new image of ghettocentrism.[21]

OF THE FOUR BANK ROBBERS in Set It Off, Cleo's characterization is tied most closely to hip hop culture and, more specifically, to gangsta rap. Obviously, casting the rap artist Queen Latifah as "Cleo" brings Latifah's hip hop roots to bear on the portrayal of "Cleo," but the film establishes an affiliation between Cleo and gangsta-ism via other means as well. For instance, when stealing cars to use as escape vehicles after robbing banks, Cleo sorts through each of the compact discs in the car, rejecting as "bullshit" and throwing out those that are not consistent with the rhythms, beats, and sentiments of rap music, the type of music that she "rides to." When the four friends go to see Black Sam (played by gangsta rap artist Dr. Dre, formerly of NWA) in order to buy guns, Cleo references her prior relationship with Black Sam (she used to steal cars for him) and otherwise indicates her knowledgeability about and familiarity with the protocols of

gangsta-ism. Later, during a conversation with Stony on the steps of the office building that they clean at night as employees of Luther's Janitorial Service, Cleo admits, "The hood is where I belong." Cleo claims that being "nothin' but a hood rat" is all right with her. She asks, laughing, "I mean what am I gonna do in Hollywood or Thousand Oaks or some shit?" By her own admission, Cleo cannot see herself in a life outside of the one she lives in the postindustrial city that defines and restrains her. Cleo's self identification of "belonging" in the hood, in addition to the other elements of her characterization mentioned above, allows her to be recognized as a representative of the ghettocentric world view expressed in gangsta rap.[22]

SET IT OFF funnels into Cleo's character much of the "black masculinity" which is one of ghettocentricity's fundamental mechanisms for rationalizing and reproducing ghettocentric social reality. A receptacle for the embattled, outlawed, and virulently "heterosexual" articulations of "black masculinity" that undergird "ghettocentrism," Cleo carries the burden of "black masculinity" so that the film's other perceptibly "female" characters, Stony, Frankie, and Tisean, can be recognized as simply "black women" (a category that carries an assumed orientation towards heterosexuality). Seeking to appeal to the broadest market possible, Set It Off allows for the "female masculinity," a term I borrow from Judith Halberstam, perceptible in Cleo to be rationalized in terms consistent with hegemonic common sense, including the ghettocentric common sense that consolidates the film's target market.[23] The film's challenge with regard to Cleo is to continue to extract value from its audiences' sensory-motor interactions with "a bulldagger."[24] Given ghettocentrism's pervasive homophobia, the tendency of a ghettocentric audience is to divest affectively from Cleo because her existence does not fit, except negatively or non-rationally, into ghettocentrism's categories of social life. In order to rationalize Cleo's existence, cinematic perception recognizes Cleo's lover, Ursula, according to a hegemonic version of "femininity."

EARLY IN THE FILM, when Cleo and Ursula kiss in front of Frankie, Tisean, and Stony, Cleo becomes visible as a "thug" or as a "butch." Prior to that kiss, Cleo appears to be one of the girls. Associated with gangsta rap, Cleo is harder or more "masculine" than the rest, but she does not necessarily appear to hegemonic common sense(s) (which already habitually call forth versions of "masculinity" in order to recognize "black woman") to be a "female" who has sex with "females." Of course, "queer common sense" might funnel her into the category "lesbian" even before she kisses Ursula. Without a pretty girlfriend, Cleo is likely to have been perceived by hegemonic common senses as something akin to a "freak of nature," leaving queer common senses to their speculations. Which is to say that Cleo's apparent "female masculinity" alone is not enough to confirm that her version of "black masculinity" is consistent with the virulent (hetero)sexuality of ghettocentricity's valorized "thug." A black femme, Ursula, appears from an unknown place in the film's out of field in order to establish and rationalize Cleo's "female masculinity," albeit controversially and with a (perhaps unpleasant) jolt to those sensory-motor schemas conditioned according to the demands of ghettocentricity's heterosexual black masculinity. Nonetheless, Ursula's appearance can be understood as an attempt to conform Cleo to ghettocentricity; after all, as Ja Rule puts it, "every thug needs a lady."

ESTABLISHING CLEO'S "masculinity," markers recognizable to hegemonic common senses as "feminine" Ursula's character offers. Throughout the film, the characters refer to Ursula's attractiveness. Upon Ursula's first appearance onscreen (after she kisses Cleo), Frankie comments that she thinks Ursula's outfit is "cute." Luther, Cleo's boss, refers to Ursula as Cleo's "little girlfriend" and Cleo explains to her friends why she has not shown up to work by showing Ursula off; "Look at what I got here. I bought my baby some new things. Check 'em out." The film asks ghettocentric common sense: What "thug" after robbing a bank would not have done the same for Ursula? Sexy and alluring,

Ursula and her relationship to Cleo call forth a ghettocentric common sense version of "masculinity" and make Cleo's "female masculinity" recognizable according to ghettocentric masculinity's contours. Like a gangsta rap "thug," Cleo possesses a fine "lady."

Ursula secures Cleo's masculinity and in that way justifies Cleo's decision to rob banks. The film goes to great lengths to provide reasons why each of its protagonists becomes a bank robber, except in Cleo's case. In *Set It Off,* each of Cleo's friends suffers some social injustice that results from her economic situation. Stony has sex with a man for her brother's college tuition money just before she loses her brother to racist police brutality. Tisean loses her son to the foster care system because she cannot afford to pay for childcare while she works. Frankie is fired from her job as a bank teller because she is accused (wrongly) of helping some men she happened to know because they lived in the same projects with her to rob the bank where she worked. While the three other primary characters in the film have a good reason for getting revenge on "the system" or making money by robbing a bank, Cleo's "masculinity" seems to be enough justification for her to resort to crime.[25]

T HE LOGIC HERE regarding Cleo's turn to crime is familiar from Blaxploitation, gangsta rap, and from the slew of "ghetto action films" of the early 1990s. It goes something like, "men" (or in the case of Cleo, "masculine women") rob banks or become criminals because they are the ones who are supposed to make the money, and when legal means fail, they find other means. "Women," on the other hand, find "men" to support them financially and, thus, they do not rob banks without a very good reason. The impoverishment of the post-industrial ghetto leaves "black masculinity" with few options for survival and "women" with few financially stable "black masculine" partners.

Like her gangsta rapping counterparts, Cleo directs attention to the lack of legal means of employment for ghetto dwellers. While the four buddies are sitting on a roof smoking marijuana across the street from an abandoned factory, Cleo points to the factory and recalls: "Before they started laying people off, they was paying folks fifteen dollars an hour at that place. ...Man, for fifteen dollars an hour, I would be an old ... 'what-I-gotta-do-sir Muthafucker. ...They'd have to pull me off that damn machine. Overtime be like twenty-two fifty an hour!" Part of the film's effort to rationalize their decision to rob banks, Cleo's observations about the abandoned factory provide a context for the soon-to-be-criminals' lack of options.

The film gives several images describing the violence and devastation that propel Stony, Frankie, and Tisean into crime. These images of "injustice" make an impact upon the viewer's senses and the viewer labors to express (via tears, anger, compassion, resentment, etc.) the quality of the injustice it has absorbed. For the viewer's money, *Set It Off* allows for a range of affective expressions, including tears, laughter, anger, a critique of "the system" and post-industrial poverty, and a sense of empathy with Stony, Frankie, and Tisean based on what can be recognized clearly as "injustices" committed against them. In order to generate value from Cleo's characterization, *Set It Off* relies upon sentiment concerning the difficulties heaped upon "black masculinity," sentiment that is already accessible in ghettocentric common sense. Cleo's car, her ghettocentric masculinity and her lady provide all the justification Cleo needs to "set it off."[26] Cleo's death scene is the violent affective pay-off that is, as Sharon Patricia Holland points out, characteristic of ghettocentric narratives, the senseless death of the "black masculine body."[27]

### "How Long Will They Mourn Me?"[28]: Cleo's Spectacular Death

I N ORDER TO (RE)CONSOLIDATE and redeploy the ghettocentricity that circulates in gangsta rap and in previous ghetto action films, *Set It Off* relies upon the reservoir of value already habituated to value ghettocentricity. Because of this, *Set It Off* must contend with its ghettocentric (and, hence, quite possibly sexist and homophobic) viewers' possible negative reactions to Cleo's recognizably female body (and, significantly, to

the shock of seeing a "black queen," Queen Latifah, kiss another woman). Within the context of the film's valorization of ghetto-centric black masculinity via the character Cleo, Cleo's homosexuality is in part a by-product of her "female masculinity."

At the same time, however, because Cleo's female masculinity resists recuperation into a heterosexual economy, her homosexuality poses a significant challenge to ghettocentric organizations of social life that assume a strict correspondence between biological sex (as determined by the existence of specific anatomical characteristics) and gender expression (e.g., historically and culturally specific notions of "masculinity" and "femininity"). Cleo's characterization seeks to expand ghettocentric black masculinity to include her, it also challenges the erotic economy that ghettocentric black masculinity currently facilitates. Cleo's ghettocentric butch masculinity opens onto both of these trajectories and keeps them in tension with each other without seeking a resolution of the two.

INTRODUCING URSULA in order to legitimate Cleo as the film's representative of ghettocentric black masculinity also has the effect of making visible "the butch" who threatens to erupt from any cinematic appearance of an image that is recognizable as a "masculine black female."[29] But "the butch" is devalued within ghettocentrism, even though heterosexual black masculinity, is valorized. In order to extract value from the ghettocentric viewer's interactions with Cleo, Set It Off subjects that viewer to the spectacle of Cleo's violent, heroic death.

Cleo dies in a barrage of bullets fired by police officers waiting for Cleo's car to emerge from the tunnel into which it was chased. Before emerging from the tunnel in her newly souped up ride to confront the waiting helicopters and cop cars, Cleo instructs Stony and Frankie (Tisean has died already) to get out of the car with the money and run. After assessing the situation from her car, Cleo makes up her mind to go down fighting the uniformed representatives of "the system." Cleo is killed; she is shot at multiple times, first while in her car and then when she emerges from the car with

her own guns blasting. During this extended and highly stylized sequence, the film's soundtrack emphasizes a slow ballad narrating the futility of Cleo's efforts to better her life and the muffled sounds of Cleo dying. Portions of the chase scene and Cleo's death itself are shown as they are framed within the film by the television sets that Keith, Black Sam, and Ursula watch. On the film's soundtrack, the emotionally evocative ballad to which Cleo dies fades as the banal pronouncement of the television news anchor is emphasized aurally: "we've just had a horrible moment here. This is our greatest fear for what were to happen. This is the most tragic culmination of the day's events."

BLACK SAM and the other perceptibly "black male" images who, forty ounce bottles of beer in hand, watch the live news broadcast of Cleo's death on television, also serve to legitimate Cleo's masculinity and, hence, to authorize an expression of its value within ghettocentric terms. Like Ursula's, Black Sam's relationship to Cleo helps to translate Cleo's "masculinity" into the sexist and heterosexist terms of ghettocentrism. This is clear when, as part of their negotiation when Cleo approaches Black Sam to buy guns, Black Sam asks Cleo to hook him up with her "girl," Frankie. Cleo rejects Black Sam's offer, saying that she will pay him back "with interest, Black Sam, and that's it." Via Black Sam, Cleo is included in the circulations and exchanges of women through which "masculinity" is consolidated. Not only does Cleo possess a pretty "little girlfriend," but she also is perceived as controlling access to Frankie.

When Black Sam sees how many helicopters and police cars are chasing Cleo, Frankie, and Stony, he comments, "Man, They're through. They got helicopters and shit. Ain't no escaping that shit." When Cleo dies, Black Sam mutters, "Damn," covering his eyes with his hand and lowering his head as if to mark his distance from the patronizing voice of the news anchor disingenuously sputtering the official apologia for the brutality of the State and the violence necessary to maintain American bourgeois hegemony and its laws. An outlaw like Cleo, Black Sam expresses grief. His expression of grief is an

indication of Cleo's entry into the realm of value operating according to ghettocentric common sense. Cleo's public execution thus functions on one level in the film as yet another instance of the senseless waste of black masculine life at the hands of the State. Black Sam and the other males watching the execution on television offer a point of identification for those of the film's viewers who have been habituated to perceive images according to ghettocentric common sense.

Cleo's death is spectacular, not only because it is broadcast live on television within the film, but also because, like "the spectacle" Guy DeBord describes, Cleo's death scene is the stark and bloody, aestheticized manifestation of bourgeois State power.[30] Unlike that of Frankie and Tisean who occupy spaces of value within ghettocentricity, however precariously, even before their deaths, Cleo's death itself is the vehicle whereby Cleo's existence is valorized. This is clear not only because her death is televised, thereby taking its place and time according to television's spatio-temporal mandate that each televisual image is an image of value in process, but also because it conforms Cleo to ghettocentrism's own mandate that each manifestation of "black masculinity" is a tendency towards death, an outlaw on the path towards a ghetto heaven.[31] Consistent with the way that ritualized deaths such as public executions have served to continue hegemonic organizations of life, Cleo's death generates Stony's "freedom," a potentially middle class lifestyle towards which Stony was heading at the beginning of the film when she thought she would be sending her brother to college. Cleo, therefore, chooses death deliberately, knowing that her death will be more valuable than her life.

**"What's Up With That? She Don't Talk?":**
**The Black Femme's Challenges to**
**Ghettocentric Common Sense**

While Black Sam's reaction to Cleo's death assists in shaping a ghettocentric common sense valorization of Cleo's outlaw "masculinity," Ursula's reaction opens onto an alternate possibility, one that more

sharply arrests the ghettocentric sensory-motor schema's movement towards the simple reproduction of ghettocentric sociality. Her reaction forces ghettocentrism to rethink some of its assumptions about sex, gender expression, and sexuality in order to make sense of Ursula.

Because they can perceive Ursula to be "attractive" (and, therefore, an understandable erotic object choice for any "masculine" figure), hegemonic common senses can find themselves invested in the life of a "black butch" without fundamentally challenging their existing assumptions concerning sexuality, the currency of femininity in erotic economies, or what constitutes an acceptable model for the organization of social life. As I have discussed, Ursula renders Cleo's "masculinity" perceptible as a version of ghettocentric black masculinity. By doing so, Ursula justifies Cleo's decision to rob banks. In this way, Ursula works to make Cleo's character *re*-productive of value by continuing the already profitable ghettocentric movements and making the film comprehensible according to ghettocentric common sense.

Ursula aids the audience in consolidating a ghettocentric black community glued together by, among other sentiments and realities, the shared sense that what it recognizes as "black masculinity" is, to invoke the cliché, an "endangered species." In this way, both Ursula and the film's audience enable the film's primary representative of "black masculinity," Cleo, to be reproductive of value. Ushering a version of "female masculinity" into the realm of value, albeit via Cleo's death, *Set It Off* cuts alternative pathways into sensory motor apparatuses habituated according to ghettocentrism, thereby preparing the way for further transductions of the value of "black masculine" death scenes.

Set It Off itself unleashes a considerable amount of violence in its attempt to direct Ursula away from the production and valorization of butch-femme and into the valorization of ghettocentric black masculinity. The violence the film unleashes limits Ursula's role in *Set It Off* to that of an erotic object via which "black masculinity" is consolidated and valorized. It also silences her. Ursula does not speak in the film.

The violence the film deploys has a correlate in the physical violence that sometimes occurs when certain people are confronted with a present perception, like "the black butch" or "the black femme," which arrests the movements via which those people make sense of the world.[32] The epistemic violence whereby the versions of "masculinity" and "femininity" that emerge in the process of consolidating "black lesbian butch-femme" are pummeled into those produced in and through traditional "gender" roles, is another correlate to the violence the film unleashes to forestall Ursula's ability to direct affectivity into an alternative movement, one not yet capable of serving the film's interests. Confronted with Ursula's tears for a bulldagger whose "butch-ness" Ursula's femme-ness helped to create and sustain and vice versa, the audience's ghettocentric affectivity can re-consolidate hegemonic heterosexual sociality only by violently conforming "butch" and "femme" to heterosexual sociality's gender categories.

URSULA HERSELF, the feminine image who works to make the film's "masculine female," Cleo, a viable character, does not make sense to the very same common sense in whose interests she labors. The common sense whose assumptions Ursula initially reinforces cannot accommodate the fact that Ursula labors to meet the erotic and emotional needs of a bulldagger who, at the beginning of the film cleans white people's homes and offices for a living and drives an old jalopy. In addition, as Jewelle Gomez and others point out, hegemonic common senses generally posit "femininity" as proper to white women and therefore they have difficulty conceiving of a "feminine black woman," much less recognizing one within a cinematic appearance, and even more difficulty with a "feminine black lesbian."[33] The disjuncture between "femininity" and "black woman" is further exacerbated by class; there is a hardness to the expressions of life in the ghetto that precludes the softness habitually attributed to "femininity." Given the common sense (dis)connections between hegemonic notions of "femininity," "black woman," and "working-class" and

"poor" class location, it is clear that had Ursula not appeared as Cleo's girlfriend, the image I am recognizing here as "a black lesbian femme" could not have appeared to ghettocentric common sense at all. Ursula would have appeared to be like Frankie, an "attractive" black woman assumed to be heterosexual.

AN "ATTRACTIVE" ("feminine") black female will become perceptible as a "lesbian" to hegemonic common senses only when she explicitly announces herself as such. At the beginning of the film, Ursula kisses Cleo, a gesture for which the film's commitment to ghettocentric black masculinity calls. But it also delineates the limits of ghettocentric common sense's current ability to accommodate the forms of sociality engineered by "black butches and femmes" as viable alternatives to existing organizations of social life, most notably, compulsory heterosexuality. Kissing Cleo, Ursula re-produces value insofar as she is a sexy and alluring erotic object, but she remains inconceivable to ghettocentrism except in those terms. Unable to use Ursula herself to continue the movement of ghettocentricity or of other types of hegemonic common senses, Set It Off leaves her as an anomaly that is incapable of speaking or of existing except in relationship to Cleo.

Ursula's silence throughout the film is so conspicuous that Frankie comments on it, asking Tisean about Ursula, "what the fuck is up with that? She don't talk?" The very thing hegemonic common senses need to be able to preserve their assumptions while transducing images of "black masculine" death, the black femme, in this case Ursula, is also what might force them to rethink those assumptions according to a new perception of the intersection of "sexuality," "femininity," "lesbianism," "ghettocentrism," and "black woman." In other words, the black femme's cinematic appearance might force hegemonic common senses to make space and time for something new. In her silence, Ursula directs hegemonic common senses, including ghettocentrism, towards a recognition that there exist within them alternative organizations of cinematic reality.

## "Prove It On Me"[*]: Black Lesbian Butch-Femme

THE "BUTCH" AND THE "FEMME" I have been formulating throughout this essay comprise the "lesbian" "butch-femme" paradigm, a socio-economic arrangement pioneered by working class and poor "lesbians." Like all identity categories, "butch" and "femme" locate a set of "problems" or "projects" or "things thrown forward" as "projections" or "substitutes" for something(s) that are inaccessible or un-representable.[35] My interest in "butch" and "femme" has less to do with their status as "identities" than with the extent to which they are available as recognizable figures that have served a vital function (according to certain historical narratives of the twentieth century in the U.S.) in the formation and sustenance of organizations of "black lesbian" sociality from within a society that actively and violently threatened their very survival.[36]

IN THE 1970s, when the nascent lesbian and gay liberation movement was achieving some cohesion and visibility as a national movement, lesbian-feminists, primarily white, argued strenuously against butch-femme, seeing it as a replica of oppressive gender roles in heterosexual relationships and championing the "woman-identified-woman" to the exclusion of other expressions of "same-sex" erotic attachment. As a result both of the transformed socio-political and economic environment some "lesbians" enjoyed and of the success of the feminist arguments against it, butch-femme became less common, except in working-class communities and in some rural communities.[37]

The dismissal of butch-femme by white middle-class lesbians was enabled further by the fact that butch-femme was no longer particularly useful for those lesbians for whom the women's and lesbian and gay movements had achieved some degree of visibility and safety. Predominately white butches and femmes quietly left the (predominately white) "lesbian feminist" movement then in formation.[38] While lesbian feminists created the "woman-identified-woman," many who

recognized themselves as "butches" and "femmes," particularly those in black communities and other places that remained invisible to lesbian feminism, simply continued to sustain their own forms of community according to the butch-femme sensibilities they had been carving out for themselves.

IT CAN BE ARGUED that in those communities where butch-femme persists, the oppression and exploitation that butch-femme provides a means to survive, has not lessened to the degree that it has for middle class white lesbians, so butch-femme continues to enable the survival of communities. Whatever the reason for the prevalence of butch-femme in communities of color, even in the face of derision and debate, two things are apparent from the discussions that continue to surround butch-femme and from its continued existence as a recognizable practice among "black lesbians." First, butch-femme still meets certain needs, whether erotic, economic, and/or something else, for certain living beings. As an element of "black lesbian" common sense, butch-femme contains nodes of consent to dominant hegemonies and it often enforces a rather rigid behavioral and aesthetic code that may have outlived its usefulness for some. At the same time, however, butch-femme also is a malleable and dynamic form of sociality that still functions as a vehicle for the survival of forms of "black lesbian" community, as a source of erotic tension and fulfillment, and as a set of personal gender choices and expressions.

Second, having been useful for survival, butch-femme has sedimented into a range of "black lesbian" common sense conceptions of "lesbianism," becoming a habituated mechanism for recognizing "black lesbians" and for organizing "black lesbian" sociality. The element of it that proved useful for achieving a degree of visibility as butches and femmes to each other and to others has sedimented into various configurations of common sense. A version of lesbian butch-femme that confirms sexist heterosexual gender roles has come to exist also in heterosexist and homophobic common senses. Such hegemonic common senses generally recognize "lesbian" by order-

ing her appearance into a form of butch-femme. (Hence, the questions based on heterosexual gender roles commonly asked of "lesbians," "which one is the man?," "who does the cooking?," etc.).

## Ursula and the Out-of-Field

WHEN CLEO AND URSULA KISS at the beginning of the film, Frankie, Stony, and Tisean turn their heads away from the couple. Their reaction, turning away, is a habituated response to the butch-femme eroticism that the kiss makes visible. The same type of reaction occurs when they walk in on Ursula dancing over Cleo who is reclining on top of her newly detailed ride. In both cases, Cleo's friends' reactions emit the violence necessary to (re)consolidate hegemonic forms of sociality, particularly the binary "gender" assumptions that support existing organizations of "heterosexuality," in the presence of a "butch-femme eroticism" that Cleo and Ursula's interactions with each other make visible and that is productive of butch-femme sociality.

Ursula's tearful reaction to Cleo's death exposes the fact that Ursula had organized her own life around and directed her erotic energies towards her butch, Cleo. Like Cleo's ghettocentric butchness, Ursula's femmeness in *Set It Off* was not aimed simply at continuing the existing movement of ghettocentric "black masculinity," but also at enabling butch-femme sociality to survive by clearing pathways for its movements. Perceiving Ursula in the frame alone for the first time in the film as she cries watching Cleo die is a unique challenge to the film's viewers, particularly to those operating according to hegemonic notions of "masculinity," "femininity," "gender," "ghettocentrism," and "sexuality." Such viewers cannot recognize a "feminine," "black," "woman" living in the ghetto whose erotic energy is directed (willfully and without coercion or incentive other than the pleasures butch-femme affords) towards another image that is recognizable as "female" without fundamentally altering their hegemonic common senses. For the ghettocentric viewer, Ursula reveals that another organization of sociality exists in the ghetto, an organization of social life that makes visible a different past—one in which "femininity" and "masculinity" are deployed creatively in order to

sustain forms of "butch-femme community." Ursula's tears reveal that in its claim to be an expression of reality, the ghettocentric organization of life, particularly its notions of "femininity" and "masculinity," is not necessarily true because it is exclusive of competing realities that co-exist with it.[39]

URSULA'S TEARS AT THE END OF THE FILM are indicative of Cleo's "value" in the production and valorization of an organization of sociality according to an alternative conception of the world that I will refer to as "butch-femme common sense." Along with Ursula, such common sense recognizes Cleo as a "butch" whose death is heroic, not simply because she died protecting her "people" (Frankie and Stony), but also because she died fighting for a better life for her and her femme. Ursula's existence in the film and the quality of her sorrow when impacted by Cleo's death is an indication of the success of "butches'" and "femmes'" past efforts to create an alternative organization of sociality.

Carrying a history of black lesbian butch-femme that ghettocentricity previously had rendered invisible, Ursula constantly calls attention to the film's "out-of-field," to off-screen space, and to "what is neither seen nor understood, but ... nevertheless perfectly present."[40] Ursula's whereabouts and actions prior to entering the frame remain unknown, like her existence when she is not with Cleo. When she is not with Cleo, Ursula exists in the film's out-of-field. By virtue of her limited role in the film, Ursula's presence in the frame carries a reference to another place that remains unseen. That reference is especially salient at the end of the film. Then, Ursula's reaction to Cleo's death opens onto another set in which butch-femme reality might be framed. Her tears, evidence of past efforts to consolidate butch-femme sociality, render her incapable of advancing the film's interests. In that shot, the only shot in the film where Ursula occupies the frame alone, her presence in the frame itself "testifies to a more disturbing presence, one which cannot even be said to exist, but rather to 'insist' or 'subsist', a more radical Elsewhere, outside homogenous space and time."[41] The last shot of Ursula in

the film rips her from the order of the visible, from the realm of the common sense she had labored until then to secure. Crying for her butch lover, she is incomprehensible to ghettocentricity's previously existing categories.

WHILE ALL OF THE FILM'S other characters die or, like Keith, Black Sam, and the cops, return to foreseeable, relatively predictable lives, Ursula simply disappears from the film after Cleo's death. But, the viewers are given no sense of to where or to when Ursula disappears. Wherever and whenever she is, there and then, she insists upon the presence of a more radical Elsewhere that even "butch-femme" cannot define. In the out of field, Ursula remains a disturbing, potentially self-valorizing image, an insistence that keeps the film's ghettocentric reality from being perfectly sealed or closed.

### Endnotes

\* A shorter version of this essay was presented as a talk on December 3, 2001, at the University of Illinois at Chicago as part of the Queer Folk/Colored Folk Lecture Series. I am grateful to the audience at that talk for their insights and comments. I am especially grateful to Jennifer DeVere Brody for reading the present essay. This essay has benefited also from Chandra Ford's insightful comments on and critiques of earlier drafts.

1. This quotation is from the lyrics to Ja Rule's rap song, "Put It On Me." Ja Rule, *Rule 3:36* (Universal/Def Jam, 2000).

2. In order to mark *Set It Off's* affiliation with those films made during the early 1990s, set in the US's predominately black ghettoes, and preoccupied with the violence and machismo they attribute to that setting, I use the category of the "ghetto action film", following S. Craig Watkins' generic delineation of it, as a generic description of the film. As do many films, however, *Set It Off* defies its generic descriptors, not least by casting four women in the lead roles. For Watkins' admittedly fluid, but generic definition of "ghetto action films," see Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema*, especially chapters 6 and 7.

3. Guerrero, Ed, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 182.

4. Watkins, S. Craig, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Chapter 7.

5. For an elaboration of the relevance of Gramsci's notion of "common sense" to the study of film that

has greatly influenced my own thinking about it, see Marcia Landy's *Film, Politics, and Gramsci* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

6. Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* translated and edited by. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1992), 9.

7. Gramsci, 9.

8. For a reminder that the consolidation of "hegemony" always involves a "struggle" and, hence, concessions and negotiations, see George Lipsitz, "The Struggle for Hegemony," *Journal of American History* 75.1 (1998): 146-50.

9. Lubiano, Wahneema, "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense: Policing Ourselves and Others," in *The House That Race Built: Black Americans/U.S. Terrain,* Wahneema Lubiano, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997).

10. Ibid., 233.

11. Ibid., 233.

12. Ibid., 234.

13. Lubiano argues that "the political realities and possibilities of black nationalism as an organizing discourse include: (1) demystification of white racial domination, (2) the transformative effects of new deployments of it—such as the valorization of black nationalist construction of community against, for example, the capitalist driven logic and aesthetics of the drug trade, and (3) activation as a bridge to international political awareness. Historically, this last aspect—international political awareness—has manifested itself as Pan-Africanism. As a bridge discourse, black nationalism can begin the work of radicalizing people unaware of international labor politics, for example, by providing a "jolt" of "recognition" of the exploitative politics of global capitalism's effects on Third World labor. None of what I have been describing is *guaranteed* by black nationalism; the proof of its capabilities rests in its deployments," Lubiano, "Black Nationalism," 236-7. Emphasis in the original.

14. Ibid., 236

15. In the larger project of which this essay is a part, I present this process and several of its conditions of possibility in greater detail than I am able to provide here.

16. Kelley, Robin D.G., "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles," in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 208-9.

17. See, for example, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967).

18. See, in particular, Watkins, *Representing,* chapters 6 and 7.

19. A reviewer writing on the *Rolling Stone* magazine's web site describes the film as a "Sisters n the Hood saga." *Set It Off,* 1996, World Wide Web, *Rolling Stone,* Available: *http://www.rollingstone.com/reviews/movie/review.asp?mid*

=73194, January 10, 2003. Writing in the *Chicago Sun Times*, Roger Ebert describes Set It Off as "like Waiting to Exhale with a strong jolt of reality," Roger Ebert, Set It Off, 1996, World Wide Web, *Chicago Sun Times*, Available: http://www.suntimes.com/ebert/ebert_reviews/1996/11/11080 4.html, January 10, 2003. Yet another reviewer quips about *Set It Off*'s "sisters in arms," "they aren't waiting to exhale, they're breathing fire," Susan Wloszczyna, "'Set It Off': A Blast of Guilty Pleasures," *USA Today*, Washington, D.C.; Nov. 6, 1996.

20. Kelley makes this point when he asserts that "the mass media attack on sexism in hip hop has obscured or ignored the degree to which rappers merely represent an extreme version of sexism that pervades daily life, across race and class," Kelley, "Kickin' Reality," 222.

21. Distributed by New Line Cinema, *Set It Off* made $8,812,105 in its opening weekend. After a four-month run, the film grossed $36,059,9110.

22. For an insightful assessment of the socio-economic context of gangsta rap's production and the socio-political implications of the worldview it expresses, see Kelley, "Kickin' Reality."

23. Halberstam, Judith, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

24. References to "black butches" ("bulldaggers") frequently were made in the cultural productions of the Harlem Renaissance, especially in the blues songs of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Lucille Bogan. But, I have found few historical narratives detailing the forms of community that "B.D. (BullDagger) Women" contributed to making. "B.D. Women Blues" is the name of a song recorded by Bessie Jackson (Lucille Bogan). For an account of the prevalence of lesbians and gays during the Harlem Renaissance, see Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem."

25. This film's efforts to justify the characters criminal actions were not plausible to some reviewers. For example, in an unfavorable review of the film in *People Weekly*, Ralph Novak writes, "Intellectually bankrupt and not much richer when it comes to principles, this bank-robbery caper is a throwback to the black-vengeance films of the '70s. The catch is that this time the black Americans seeking revenge for various wrongs are four gun-crazy females. Director F. Gary Gray and writers Takashi Bufford and Kate Lanier strive frantically to rationalize the quartet's murderous rampage, but without much success. Of the women, only Fox…has a real ax to grind against 'the system'—she has been unjustly fired from her job as a bank teller. Of the others, Latifah has the weakest case. Her main complaint seems to be that as a lesbian who wants to hang out with her girlfriend, she is an object of derision. Pinkett, meanwhile, has an unlikely romance with Underwood, who picks her up while she cases the bank where he is an officer. Even Underwood's considerable skills can't make his naïve character plausible." Ralph Novak, "Set It Off," *People Weekly* 46.20 (1996).

26. For Stony, the despair her brother's death caused her and her desire to get out of the "the hood" initially provide her the rationale for robbing the first bank. After Stony starts dating a rich banker whom she meets while she and Tisean are casing the bank where he works, her good reason for robbing banks is diminished; Keith earns more than enough money to support Stony. Out of a ghettocentric sense of loyalty to her lifelong friends, her "people," Stony continues to rob banks even after her relationship with Keith begins to look more promising. It is Cleo who voices the ghettocentric principle of loyalty when she reminds Stony (who says she does not want to rob the second bank) that "you been my people for years." Significantly, Stony is the only one of the four still alive at the end of the film.

27. See Holland, Sharon Patricia, *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), Chapter 1.

28. "How Long Will They Mourn Me?" is the title of a song by Tupac Shakur, featuring Nate Dogg. Tupac Shakur, *Thug Life* (Interscope Records 1994).

29. For instances, Jennifer DeVere Brody draws attention to the "coincidence of the name of Queen Latifah's butch "Cleo" in *Set It Off* and that of the sunning and statuesque former model's (Tamara Dobson) character, "Cleopatra Jones." Brody asks, "Is it mere coincidence that Queen Latifah's role as a black lesbian bank robber in F. Gary Gray's film *Set It Off* (1996) is named "Cleo?" For Brody, *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975) offers an opportunity to explore the way that "the film, read by black queer viewers as black history, can be both prologue to and precedent for examining representations of black women in the sense that the "same" object, the character Cleopatra Jones, represents what has always already been there—the differently read black subject." Brody's essay makes visible the queer who has been threatening to erupt from the Blaxploitation "shero," Cleopatra Jones. See Jennifer DeVere Brody, "The Return of Cleopatra Jones," *Signs*, Autumn 1999, Vol. 25 il, p. 91.

30. See Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

31. For a formulation of television images as images of value-in-process, see Richard Dienst's analysis of television as a Marxian machine in Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 199$), Chapter 2. For an articulation of "black masculinity" as a tendency toward death, hear especially the recordings of Tupac Shakur and see Sharon Patricia Holland, "Bill T. Jones, Tupac Shakur and the (Queer) Art of Death," *Callaloo*, 23.1 (2000).

32. Much of the information I give here about butch-femme is contained in the historical account of a butch-femme community in Buffalo, New York provided in Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Penguin Books

USA, Inc., 1994) See also, Joan Nestle, "Butch-Femme Relationships: Sexual Courage in the 1950s," in *A Restricted Country: Essays and Short Stories* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988). Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1993), Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1997, 1982), and Ed. Sally R. Munt, *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender* (Herndon, VA: Cassell, 1998.

33. Jewelle Gomez addresses some of the stereotypes about femmes. Among them: "Femmes are white, blacks are butches. The explicit racism and sexism in this stereotype persists in every lesbian community. It is a defamatory extension of the sexual stereotyping of both African-Americans and of white women." Gomez, Jewelle L., "Femme Erotic Independence," *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*. Ed. Sally Munt (London, UK: Cassell, 1998).

34. The title of this section includes a reference to Ma Rainey's song "Prove It On Me Blues." This song according to Eric Garber, "speaks directly to the issue of lesbianism. In it she admits to her preference for masculine attire and female companionship, yet dares her audience to 'prove it' on her." Garber, Eric, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. Eds. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Jr. Chauncey (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 236.

35. For a discussion of "the black" as a "problem," see my essay "'In the Interval': Frantz Fanon and the 'Problems' of Visual Representation," forthcoming in *Qui Parle*. I invoke that discussion here in order to indicate the extent to which my reliance upon "butch" and "femme" as expressions of a specific organization of social existence is inherently "problematic." As I explain in what follows, my interest in "butch" and "femme" is not rooted in questions of "identity," but in what an exploration of the constitution of those categories within common sense can reveal about the way that social reality is produced cinematically and about the possibilities for alternatives to that reality to emerge from within the process of its production.

36. The term "lesbian" here is merely descriptive. I employ it to indicate that both the "butch" and the "femme" are recognizably anatomically "female" and that the relationship between them is erotic and physical. Though I use the term "lesbian" in reference to even those whose invisibility within that category secures its very legibility to "official" common sense, I am not suggesting that "lesbian" necessarily provides a coherent or desirable project for those who simultaneously consider themselves to be "female," feel that they are "black," and develop erotic relationships with other "females." For a more thorough critique of "lesbian," see my "Joining the Lesbians: Cinema and the Question of Black Lesbian Visibility," forthcoming in Eds. E.

Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. Duke University Press, forthcoming. There, I analyze the way that Yvonne Welbon's film *Living With Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100* and Cheryl Dunye's film *The Watermelon Woman* illustrate how "lesbian" has been consolidated to the exclusion of poor and working-class women of color and the ways that including such women in "lesbian" might unsettle the very "logic" on which the category relies for its legibility.

37. For a discussion of the 1970s lesbian feminist stance against butch-femme, see Roof, Judith, "1970s Lesbian Feminism Meets 1990s Butch-Femme," *Butch/Femme: Inside Lesbian Gender*, ed. Sally R. Munt (Herndon, VA.: Cassell, 1998). Most relevant to the present discussion is an essay that Roof references, written by Anita Cornwell, "one of the few black lesbian feminists publishing essays in a predominately white media during [the late 1960s and early 1970s]." In "Three for the Price of One: Notes from a Gay Black Feminist," Cornwell laments being mistaken for "a stud" by a "Black lesbian" friend and attributes the fact that butch-femme persists among black lesbians to the racism of the women's movement. Writing in the late 1970s, Cornwell asserts that "Not surprisingly, fear of encountering racism seems to be one of the main reasons that so many Black womyn refuse to join the Womyn's Movement. This is especially unfortunate for the Black lesbians because, unless they have come across Feminist ideas from somewhere, they are apt to remain in the old rut of sexual role playing that apparently affects all traditional Lesbian circles." Anita Cornwell, "Three for the Price of One: Notes from a Gay Black Feminist," *Black Lesbian in White America* (Minneapolis: Naiad Press, 1983), 12.

38. In her novel *Stone Butch Blues*, Leslie Feinberg writes, "We thought we'd won the war of liberation when we embraced the word gay. Then suddenly there were professors and doctors and lawyers coming out of the woodwork telling us that meetings should be run with Roberts Rules of Order... They drove us out, made us feel ashamed of how we looked. They said we were male chauvinist pigs, the enemy. It was women's hearts they broke. We were not hard to send away, we went quietly." Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues*, 11.

39. I am invoking here Gilles Deleuze's formulation of "the powers of the false" in his *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

40. Deleuze, Gilles, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Hammerjam. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 16.

41. Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 17.